



Life in Northeast Florida, 1000 CE



The salt marshes of the St. Johns River are the only remaining places that retain the look and feel of Northeast Florida one thousand years ago.

Using our imaginations and insights from archaeology, we can return to the Florida of 1000 CE.

Did the river and landscape look different?

There were no rock jetties directing the shape of the St. Johns River. The river angled out to the northeast with great sandy shoals and huge breakers at its mouth. The natives needed great skill to paddle to and from the ocean in their dugout canoes.

Once on the river the water was placid. The tea colored water was clear and had a fresh, pungent, clean smell. Open vistas contained familiar trees, plants and animals.

What were the people like?

Daily life was closely tied to the estuaries, the river, and coastal uplands. Native people used only the natural resources they needed and lived communally, not keeping any personal property save specialized tools, clothes, and ornaments.

Men were providers and protectors. They wore loincloths, grew long hair and trussed it atop their heads in a bun. Women grew vegetables and prepared food. They also gathered nuts, dug roots, and collected shellfish. They wore their

hair long and straight down their backs. Their clothing consisted of garments made from woven Spanish moss.

Kinship was traced through the mother's line. Both men and women wore tattoos that signified their clan as well as their roles in society. People of high political status had the most tattoos.

How did they live?	Settlements consisted of camps, villages, and a large ceremonial city that served as the hub and capitol of this region. There were at least 20 villages, home to between 100 to 300 people each, built along the river's edge, within the area we now call Duval County. The distance between them, by water, was about two miles. Homes were circular, with palm thatched roofs and walls of woven vines caulked with clay. Each village was governed by a chief who was subordinate to a regional chief.	In the large city, the regional chief and members of high- ranking clans lived in elaborate ornate dwellings. There was an artisan class of wood carvers, potters, shell workers, painters and specialized craftsmen. Copper and other materials were obtained through a trade network that extended as far north as the Great Lakes. The most prominent building was an oval shaped council house, built of whole tree trunks, large enough to seat hundreds of people.
How abundant were the animals and fish?	<p>Along the river were huge schools of fish, herds of manatees, and many waterfowl. In 1000 AD, there were over one million alligators, some over 20 feet long.</p> <p>Weirs were built to catch fish. Fish and crustaceans swam into the salt marsh at high tide. A mesh of tree branches bound with vines was then pulled across the entrance. The fish and crabs were</p>	<p>easily picked up or speared at low tide. These ingenious labyrinths took much time to build and maintain. Hardly any stretch of the river was free from their presence.</p> <p>The marshes were full of oysters and easily harvested. Today all along the creek banks there are huge piles of oyster shells called middens or mounds, evidence of their abundance.</p>
What did the inhabitants believe?	They believed the world was populated by gods, demons, and spirits. The universe consisted of the Sky, home to the gods and the spirits of deceased chiefs and nobles, the Underground, the abode of demons and the departed spirits of common people, and the Earth where spirits confronted people every day. Any animal showing unusual	behavior could be a messenger of good or evil. Even normal behavior could be taken as an omen. For example, the cry of a startled owl could indicate impending evil, the natural call of an owl, pity upon the living. An encounter with a snake was always a sign of future trouble.
What happened to the people?	When Europeans first came to the shores of Florida, they found a thriving society. They also brought many diseases that were not known in this hemisphere. With no previous exposure to these diseases, even the common cold was life threatening.	Explorers and settlers used the native population as slaves, soldiers and heavy laborers. These hazardous occupations, added to the burden of disease, completely decimated the peoples of north Florida. We remember them as the Timucua.